

# Kenny Werner (solo piano)

Walter Hall, January 22, 2000 8 p.m.

**KENNY WERNER** was born November 19, 1951, in Brooklyn, and his introduction to music and performing came at the age of four when he joined a children's song and dance group. At the age of eleven, he recorded a single with a fifteen-piece orchestra and appeared on television playing stride piano. His love of the classics was nurtured when, while still in high school, he attended the Manhattan School of Music, where he became a concert piano major upon completion of his high school studies.

Werner's emotional need to improvise began to take him out of the classical world and into the world of jazz. So, in 1970, he transferred to the Berklee School of Music. There he began to find his creative direction. In Boston he met his piano teacher and spiritual guide, Madame Chaloff. "She was the first person I met who pulled together the spiritual and musical aspects," recalls Werner. She ignited in him a concept that was furthered by his next teacher, João Assis Brasil, a concert pianist who successfully demonstrated to Werner effortless piano playing with a self-loving attitude. Werner met Mr. Brasil while touring South America with João's twin brother, Victor Assis Brasil. This ideology blossomed in Werner and constitutes his approach to music and creativity today.

In 1977, Werner recorded an LP that featured piano solos of the music of **Bix Beiderbecke**, **Duke Ellington**, **James P. Johnson**, and **George Gershwin**. Soon thereafter, Werner found himself recording with the great **Charles Mingus** on *Something Like A Bird*. Then, in 1981, Werner recorded his own solo album of original compositions entitled *Beyond the Forest of Mirkwood*. The following year, Werner recorded the sounds heard coming from his Brooklyn-based studio - a hotbed of late-night jam sessions - and titled the record after his address, *298 Bridge Street*.

In the early '80's, Kenny Werner toured extensively with **Archie Shepp**. In 1984 he joined the **Mel Lewis Orchestra**. His appearances also included solo concerts in Europe and New York City and duos with such notables as **Rufus Reid**, **Ray Drummond** and **Jaki Byard**. Werner received performance grants from the National Endowment for the Arts in both 1985 and 1987, allowing him the unique

opportunity to present his own music in a concert hall setting at Symphony Space in New York. He was also commissioned to compose and conduct a memorial piece for **Duke Ellington** at St. John of the Divine Church in New York. The work was performed by the Manhattan School of Music's State Band and the New York City Choir. Werner has also written compositions for the **Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra**, now known as the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra.

In 1981, he began to play with bassist **Ratzo Harris** and drummer **Tom Rainey**. They weren't to make their first CD until 1988, for Sunnyside Records, entitled *Ken Werner, Introducing the Trio*. He would do another trio album for Sunnyside and a beautiful quintet album, featuring **Randy Brecker**, **Joe Lovano**, and **Eddie Gomez**, entitled *Uncovered Heart*. The trio with Harris and Rainey was an association that would last 14 years. The band agreed to

terminate, for the moment, in 1995. This trio was acknowledged by those in-the-know as one of the most daring and innovative trios to ever play together. Peter Wairous of "The New York Times", upon hearing the trio, called their rhythm "near miraculous." Bob Blumenthal of "The Boston Globe", a long time supporter of the trio, said, "it [the Kenny Werner Trio] has provided an ever-evolving



definition of the spontaneity that remains at the heart of jazz...unsurpassed as a working trio." Werner feels that much of his musical development, conceptually and rhythmically, was directly due to the experience of playing with these two innovators.

In the fall of 1987 Kenny Werner joined the faculty of the New School's jazz department in New York City, where he taught jazz harmony and theory for six years. He has given clinics at many universities in the United States and abroad, and teaches privately as well. Out of his teaching experience Werner had published articles in music and health magazines. It was the beginning of good things to come for him as an educator.

In over a quarter century of performing, Werner has played with such jazz greats as **Bob Brookmeyer**, **Ron Carter**, **Joe Williams**, **Chico Freeman**, **Sonny Fortune**,



Peter Erskine, John Abercrombie, Jackie Paris, Bobby McFerrin, Lee Konitz, Billy Hart, Marian McPartland, Joe Henderson, Tom Harrell, Gunther Schuller, Ed Blackwell, Paul Motian, John Scofield, Jack DeJohnette, Eddie Gomez, Dave Holland, Charlie Haden and Toots Thielemans. He continues to share a long and creative relationship with good friend Joe Lovano, and can be heard on several of Lovano's albums.

The '90's had found Werner still actively leading his own trio until the breakup in '95, and performing in the groups of Joe Lovano, Tom Harrell and Toots Thielemans, making numerous appearances in Europe, and writing big band charts for groups such as the Cologne Radio Jazz Orchestra (WDR), the Danish Radio Jazz Orchestra and the Umo Jazz Orchestra (Finland).

He has also served as pianist, arranger and musical director for the noted film, television and Broadway star, **Betty Buckley**. He credits his work with her as an important factor in the widening of his scope as an arranger. He says, "Betty is looking for the intrinsic meaning behind every note, every phrase in the song, challenging the arranger to stretch the limits of his creativity and skill. This experience, I am quite sure, has instilled in me a whole other dimension as an arranger, one I wouldn't have had just by arranging jazz projects. Now I bring a much more visual sense into my jazz playing and arranging."

In 1993 he was awarded another grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to present a concert in tribute to Mel Lewis, featuring some of Werner's original compositions. That same year he also won the **Distinguished Artist Award for Composition** from the New Jersey Council of the Arts for a piece entitled "Kadinsky" from his CD *Paintings*. And in 1995, recognizing a talent in composition that rivals Werner's phenomenal talents as a pianist, the NEA awarded Werner yet another grant, this one for the purpose of composing a piano concerto dedicated to Duke Ellington, performed in February 1996 by the Cologne Radio Orchestra.

The early '90's also found Werner making his first appearance on the Concord Jazz label with his *Maybeck Recital Hall Series, Volume 34*, solo piano recording. Released in September 1994, the recording was met with much-deserved accolades from the jazz press. UPI jazz critic Ken Franklin listed the album as one of the Top 10 Jazz Recordings of 1994. "Werner's set," wrote "JazzTimes" critic Fred Bouchard, "is one of the very best in a series that has quietly become the pianists' yardstick of our era." His second Maybeck Hall CD, *Concord Duo Series, Volume Ten*, a duet with Chris Potter, was chosen as the best album of 1996 by Goerge Kanzler, jazz critic for the "New Jersey Star Ledger." His last recording for Concord was to be the last recording of his trio with Harris and Rainey, *Live at Visiones*. What is significant is that this is their first live recording after all those years. Now it's possible for listeners to sample the intensity that happened regularly when they played gigs. Werner felt it was "essential to record our versions of these

standards, to document as much of the evolution of the tunes we have played over our 15-year history to date."

In 1998, Werner recorded two highly-acclaimed new trio CDs - *A Delicate Balance* for BMG/RCA, featuring **Dave Holland** and **Jack DeJohnette**, and *Unprotected Music* for Double-Time, featuring **Marc Johnson** and **Joey Baron** - and also toured with a pair of other fine trios - **Ray Drummond** and **Billy Hart** in the spring and summer, and **Dave Carpenter** and **Peter Erskine** in the fall. Werner is also excited about the **Andy Statman Quartet**. For those who don't know Andy, he is one of the pioneers of Klezmer music in America. He has recorded a CD with Kenny called *Between Heaven and Earth: The Music of the Jewish Mystics* which has already garnered a lot of media interest. Kenny says it really feels like the band has a "destiny." Working with this band is in line with Werner's evolving spiritual goals for his music. He says, "Andy's music is all about light and consciousness and that is the only goal I am increasingly interested in."

To that end, in January of 1997, his book, **Effortless Mastery**, was published and is quickly causing ripples in the music world, changing many musicians' conceptions about how to practice, play, and listen. It is also causing those who have read the book or heard his clinics to grow spiritually and accept the true purpose of musicianship. Werner says, "I am getting responses from people almost daily about the effect the book is having on them, and I am a bit humbled by these responses. It not only challenges those musicians to change, it challenges me to be a worthy vessel for this message."

Of the future, he says, "I want to move beyond entertainment and art to serve my audience as a pure vessel for light and inspiration. As we head toward the next millennium, it is time for musicians to abandon their limited concepts of what music is and who they are. Historically, musicians have been at the forefront of cultural and spiritual revolutions. It is time for us to drop our petty concerns of what is and isn't jazz and serve the music's original purposes: to express the inexpressible, to unite and expand all people in light and love, and to express and induce a state of ecstasy, which is our birthright."

## Thank you

This evening's concert would not have been possible without the generous support of Long & McQuade Musical Instruments, sponsors of the 1999-2000 jazz concert and masterclass series at the Faculty of Music.